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Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The Fruits of Ignorance

The secret diversion of funds from Iranian arms shipments to Nicaraguan contras, unknown to key officials until last weekend, reflects a level of ignorance in the administration threatening grave consequences for the Middle East.

Even if deposed National Security Adviser John Poindexter knew about the contra connection, he was in the dark about other aspects of the secret deal. That ignorance explains why some in the administration and congressional probers now fear Iran may have acquired the military power to sweep the Middle East with its fanatical Islamic revolution, a potential disaster for both the West and the Arabs.

In a telephone briefing of Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole that Dole's office said occurred Nov. 14, Adm. Poindexter stated what he obviously believed to be true: about 1,000 TOW antitank missiles had been shipped to Iran. But on Nov. 21, CIA Director William Casey was quoted by House Democratic Leader Jim Wright as saying that at least 2,008 TOW missiles, more than twice Poindexter's total, had gone to Iran.

"It will be months before anyone has the facts," an administration official told us. "Today, we can't even guess because the record is so full of blank spots."

That may not be all that unusual for clandestine operations run out of Casey's CIA. But for an operation ostensibly controlled by Poindexter's National Security Council staff, it is regarded by leaders of both parties on Capitol Hill as wholly unacceptable.

Beyond that lies this question being asked at the highest levels here: Did the end of America's antiterrorist Iranian arms embargo inadvertently open the floodgates for enough sophisticated weapons from Israel and other countries to turn the tide of battle in the Iran-Iraq war? The harder next question is whether President Reagan, in the event Iraqi

strongman Saddam Hussein is toppled, could stop the Islamic revolutionary tide from sweeping the Arab Middle East.

Such a dynamic transformation of the Middle East, once indelibly linked to the West, would set off political explosions as far off as oil-shy Japan and produce a policy upheaval throughout the West.

Diplomats working for Secretary of State George Shultz insist privately that the question of escalating arms shipments was apparently never fully considered by Robert C. McFarlane, the originator of the Iranian arms deal. When new NSC adviser Poindexter was bequeathed the undercover program from McFarlane last Dec. 4, sources say, he was not fully informed by mid-level operatives who ran the program day-to-day. They also question whether Poindexter has been kept completely briefed since then on every facet of the deal.

There is growing evidence that Iran is making good use of its new weapons—shipments far larger than what President Reagan described on Nov. 13 as "modest deliveries [that] could easily fit into a single cargo plane." For the first time, newly armed Iranian patrol boats are making night attacks on coastal vessels flying the flags of small Persian Gulf nations. This is viewed as a muscle-flexing maneuver to convince these pro-Western, anti-Iranian oil states that they will have to come to terms with Iran sooner or later.

U.S. Hawk missiles, apparently shipped to Iran from both the United States and Israel, have drastically cut back on Iraqi air attacks against Iran's oil lifeline at Kharg Island. As we write, there has been no attack on the loading platforms at Kharg for more than a week. The oil terminal is essential for Iran to earn hard currency to pay for the new arms supplies it

has been buying since the U.S. embargo ended.

More ominous for the White House and its Western allies is the soft public treatment by the Ayatollah Khomeini for the faction in Tehran that arranged the arms shipments. Instead of demanding a firing squad, or at least a thousand lashes, Khomeini has successfully protected the leader of that faction, Hashemi Rafsanjani, the speaker of Parliament.

Rafsanjani appears to be one of the most important if not the leading anti-Iraqi war hawk. That raises the disturbing question whether Khomeini himself, and not so-called Islamic "moderates," has been the real—if shadow—power behind the U.S. arms deal, sucking the "Great Satan" into a war-winning "scam."

But within the Reagan administration, the Iran arms deal appears to have been so highly compartmentalized that these long-range dangers to American interests never got the hearing they deserved. They were submerged under the effort of the moment to extract American hostages with arms and at the same time to open a channel to "moderates."

Shultz, understandably outraged by the collapse of his antiterrorist policy, appears to have shut his eyes to the entire enterprise. His silent invocation of a plague on the White House for arming a terrorist state effectively barred expert policy guidance from his own specialists, who saw the danger.

If the flood of arms now unleashed by ending the U.S. embargo does result in Hussein's fall, Reagan's present political problem will be dwarfed. He will face a resurgent Islam sworn to destroy Israel and to obliterate every Western vestige from what it regards as holy Islamic soil.

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